

**Yet Another ‘Charger’: 1477 Private Edward John Firkins, 13th Light Dragoons****by Dr Douglas J Austin      18      [ TWC 27(1) p6 2009 ]**

I refer to Dr Alastair Massie’s magnificent book *‘A Most Desperate Undertaking’* (ISBN 0 901721 38 7), published by the National Army Museum, Chelsea, in 2003. That book is a lasting record of the NAM exhibition, on show there in commemoration of the Crimean War 1854-56. On page 111, there is an image showing 2 of the 6 pages of Private Firkins’ original manuscript account (NAM 1986-02-75) of the Charge of the Light Brigade, with a note that the expert Canon Lummis came to accept Firkins as a genuine ‘Charger’, based on that account. With kind permission from the Council of the National Army Museum and from Dr Massie, this article presents a full transcription together with the note published by Canon Lummis. Please note that I have ‘modernised’ Firkins’ punctuation and format (but not his spelling) to enhance its readability. While there are what appear to be errors in Firkins’ account, it provides strong evidence that he was indeed a ‘Charger’, to be added to the growing list.

According to L. W. Crider’s book *‘In Search of the Light Brigade’* (p 251) and Roy Mills’ excellent website (<http://www.chargeofthelightbrigade.com/>), Firkins was born in St. Johns, Worcester and enlisted on 22 June, 1852, after employment as a “Clerk”. He was described as being 18 years old and 5’7” tall. The regimental history indicates that he sailed from Portsmouth on the ‘Culloden’ on 10 May, 1854, with Major Gore and detachments. The muster roll shows him as being sent to Scutari as "sick" on the 11th of October 1854, and he is on the muster roll there from the 16th, being returned to the regiment on the 20th, but not when he rejoined, although he is shown as being "struck off the ration strength for 5 days on board ship and 3 days in the hospital." Present at all 3 musters in the Crimea, he was Acting Hospital Sergeant for 63 days from 23 July, 1855, succeeding 1353 Sergeant Augustus Gully, gone to duty. Firkins was promoted to Corporal on 10 October, 1855, and was discharged by purchase (£30) at Ballincollig on 21 August, 1856, having served a total of 4 years 61 days, with 2 years in Turkey and the Crimea. His conduct and character were described as "good" and he held one Good Conduct badge. A supplementary Medal Roll (undated) signed by Major Henry Holden shows him as being issued with the Crimean medal (with clasps for Alma, Balaclava and Inkerman) on the 7th of October 1855. Firkins was entitled to the Sebastopol clasp and to the Turkish Crimean Medal. His medals were sold at Bonhams, Knightsbridge, on 5 July 2005.

Firkins appears in the 1861 Census as “Edward Farkins”, aged 28, married, a “Manufactory Clerk” born at Worcester, with his wife Mary, aged 24, also born at Worcester, aged 24, their son William E., aged 4, born Worcester and Mary L., aged 2, born in Birmingham. Their address is shown as No. 10, 4 Court House, Bull Street, St Philip’s Parish, Birmingham.

By 1871 they were living in the Aston parish of Birmingham and Edward is shown as an “Engineers Clerk”. The 1881 Census Return shows a man named Edward Firkins, “Clerk”, living at No. 35 Summer Road, Edgbaston, Warwickshire, aged 47, born in Worcester, with his wife, Mary A., aged 42, born in Worcester and 5 children, 2 boys and 3 girls, aged from 24 to 11 years.

By 1891, Firkins was still living at Summer Road, Edgbaston, but his occupation was now that of “Beer Retailer”, which indicates that he was keeping a Public House. Two of his sons Arthur, aged 34, “Chemist” and William, aged 32, “Engine Fitter” were still in the household. His unusual surname still persists in and around Worcester.

Camp before Sebastopol Dec 27th 1854

Dear Sir

Thank God, now I have materials and opportunity, I am well and able to write you a few lines to prove you are not forgotten by me but, on the contrary, your friendship is as dear to me or more so than ever. Believe me, I should have written before but could not procure paper, pens, or ink. I think it is about six weeks since I received a letter from you. I assure you it was dearly welcome, for I began to think you took my silence for neglect and treated me accordingly but I found from the contents of your letter it was not so either by yourself or friends and for the compliment paid me by the enquiries of the ladies after my health and safety I feel grateful.

I know you have taken the greatest interest in reading the accounts the papers have given of our different engagements and you know the fatal battle we had at Balaklava on the 25th of Octr was the ruin of the Light Brigade of Cavalry. I am sure, old fellow, a short account of that dreadful charge by an old friend and a sharer in its dangers and glories will be read with pleasure by you. I must tell you of a fortnight's illness I had previous to that affair, an attack of cholera. They sent me with near 300 others down to Scutari where I remained only four days. I returned just in time to share in the glories of that fatal day, arriving in camp on the Evening of the 24th.<sup>1</sup>

The next morning we turned out as usual for any attack the enemy might make on us. Day dawned and all was quiet for about half an hour<sup>2</sup> when we heard a gun fire from our batteries then in the keeping of about 3000 cowardly Turks. We got the word 'Mount' which we did instantly, and prepared ourselves for some warm work, knowing that there were about five times our number of the enemy in our rear. After a few more shots from the enemys field pieces on our Batteries, the rascally Turks to a man ran down the hill towards Balaclava (well for them that they did not come towards us) leaving our guns in the hands of the Russians without even spiking them<sup>3</sup> who only had to turn their angles and fire upon us which they did but with little effect.<sup>4</sup> By this time they had brought their Cavalry and field pieces in view. The town of Balaclava was on the right of our position that point being protected by our brave 93 Highland. The Russian Cavalry, thinking that was the weakest point and nearest the town, charged the 93 but the brave Scotchmen emptied their saddles by dozens.<sup>5</sup> Being repulsed there, they got reinforcements<sup>6</sup> and charged the Scotch Greys, and other heavy Dragoon Regiments formed up a little on our Right but here those that were not cut down were driven back by the Bonny Greys. It was now our turn. An order came from our Commander in Chief to charge the enemies position and retake our guns and, if possible, the enemies batteries.<sup>7</sup> The old 13th and 17th Lancers were in the front, the 8 Hussars the 11th Do. and 4th Light Dragoons (a little in our rear. At this time we were a mile from the Russian Batteries. They saw us advancing and opened a deadly fire upon us which brought a few men and horses down. We rushed on and succeeded (*sic*) in retaking our guns.<sup>8</sup> With an "Hurrah " we dashed on towards the enemies Batteries which we found were in a valley, their guns forming three sides of a square with 30 in front and 10 on either side,<sup>9</sup> from which they were firing with deadly aim on our men, cutting lanes through our ranks bringing men and horses down by 1/2 dozens. We cut our way through a regiment of Lancers and dashed up to the guns with a shout,<sup>10</sup> cut down the gunners and succeeded in taking them but "Alas" there was no one to assist us in keeping them and being only a handful amongst thousands we thought we were lost and turned to make the best of our way back. The enemy now took possession of their guns again<sup>11</sup> and opened a fire of Grape canister, round shot and shell upon every man they could put their eyes on and Infantry on either side picking off every man they could see. By this time I could not see three men of our Regiment. I of course thought I was lost but I turned my Mares Head to try to get back if I could. I had only got a few yards when I saw two Russian Lancers coming towards me with clenched teeth and staring like savages. I prepared to meet them with as much coolness and determination as I could command. The first one made a thrust at me with his Lance. It is a heavy weapon and easily struck down, which I did with my sword thrusting it at the same time through the fellows neck. He fell from his

horse with a groan. The shock nearly brought me from my saddle. The other fellow wheeled round his dying comrade and made a thrust at me. I had not strength to strike down the blow for my sword fell from my grasp, but my time was not yet come. One of our Lancers, seeing the attack made on me, came to my assistance and thrust his Lance clean through the fellows body at the moment I lost my sword. It was no time nor place for thanks. I turned about to get back if I could. I had not got ten yards before a shell struck my poor Mares quarters taking off part of her rump. She of course fell but even here I escaped. I cleared myself of the saddle and poor dieing horse and succeeded, through a field of blood and scrambling over dead and dieing men and horses, in reaching the rear and getting out of gun shot. I enquired for the remains of our unfortunate Regiment, we could only muster nine men. By night all the straglers came in and all we could then muster then was 27 and this is now the strength of our Regiment.<sup>12</sup> There were many only wounded which were taken at the time down to Scutari and not yet returned.

In a few days we marched up towards Sebastopol within a mile and a half of the city where we stayed till after the battle of Inkerman on the 5th of Novr. On that day we did not lose a man but every other Regt of the Light Brigade lost one or two men though we were so few. We were in the field but did not charge for the chief of the battle took place in brushwood up to our horses bellies. We turned out at daybreak and it was dusk in the evening before we returned to our lines. I sincerely hope I shall never behold such sights as I did that day at Balaclava alone. At Balaclava we lost our Capn Goad, his brothers horse was shot, Sergeant Major Lincoln, Sergeant Smith both taken prisoners.<sup>13</sup> For our privations and hardships in Camp, I cannot attempt a description. Sometimes it is miserably hot, at others bitter cold. A few weeks ago we had a storm of snow, hail and rain, the wind blowing at the time a hurricane which blew up our tents like bits of rag leaving us no other covering but our cloaks the whole day and part of the night. The ground being so soddened from the previous rains it would not hold the pegs for us to pitch the tents again.<sup>14</sup> Had I time and space I could tell you many incidents occuring in the Campaign to which I am an eye witness and sometimes a principal character but I hope to return yet, old fellow, and smoke a pipe with you, when I shall feel a pleasure in reciting to you all I shall have seen or endured.

I sincerely trust, Dear Friend, that yourself, your amiable partner and family have spent a happy Christmas. I have many times thought of those pleasant nights I spent with you last winter and hope there are a few more in store for me. You will please remember me to the Mother, Brothers and Sisters. I suppose John is all right by this time and, if it is so, tell him I wish him every happiness. A few more words of the war. Sebastopol is not yet taken but the French and us have been incessantly firing on it night and day since 27th of Septr. We have now 390 Guns in play upon it and the forts. It is not yet decided wether we shall storm it or destroy it. I will write you directly either takes place, but there is some talk of us coming home since we were so cut up and diminished in numbers. I hope so. Now my dear friend I must conclude and I hope you will write on the first opportunity and send me a paper sometimes. It is three months since I received one from you. I should like a Punch. For the present, Adieu with sincere regards to yourself, Wife and all members of your family hoping you are all spending a merrier Christmas than myself. Believe me Yours Truly and Sincerely

Edwd John Firkins    Parker sends his regards...<sup>15</sup>

Canon Lummis wrote in the '*Journal of the Orders and Medals Society*', 24(3), 145, 1985:-  
 "Charge of the Light Brigade: 1477 Pte. Edward John Firkins of the 13th Light Dragoons. I have seen a copy of an original 6 page letter written at 'Camp before Sebastopol' dated 27 December 1854 in which he describes his experiences in the Charge of the Light Brigade. In our book Honour the Light Brigade, page 216, we did not record him as a Charger, but I feel he can be confirmed as such. Revd. Canon W. M. Lummis

Given this account and the Canon's endorsement, I am convinced that Private Edward John Firkins can rightly be added to the increasing list of known 'Chargers'.

Notes:

1. Firkins was sent to Scutari on 11 October, perhaps a 2 day voyage. A short period in hospital there and a return voyage of 2 days to Balaklava (perhaps arriving on 21 October) followed by 3 days in hospital there, could permit his return to duty on the evening of 24 October.
2. My own research indicates that the first gun from the Turkish-held Redoubt 1 was fired at or shortly after first light (0643), well before sunrise proper (0713). Both times are given as UT + 3 hours.
3. Reportedly, the guns in 3 of the 4 redoubts were spiked by British gunners, three of whom were awarded medals.
4. Other accounts state that the Russians did use the British guns against our troops.
5. This seems to over-state the Russian losses.
6. The main body of Russian cavalry apparently split into a smaller part, which attacked the 93rd Highlanders, and a larger, which advanced more slowly towards Kadikoi and Balaklava.
7. Elsewhere, I have adduced good evidence that an earlier verbal order, also brought by Nolan, did specifically require the British Cavalry to 'retake' the Redoubt guns captured by the Russians. The written 4th Order, however, included no instruction to 'retake our guns', nor to capture the enemies (unspecified) batteries.
8. Incorrect. This may relate to the withdrawal of elements of the Odessa Regiment from Redoubts 2 and 3 to form square, in anticipation of a direct attack by cavalry. Those guns were not, in fact, recaptured.
9. Incorrect. The Russian artillery did not number 30 and was positioned on the Fedioukine Heights, the Causeway Heights and towards the eastern end of the North Valley, not disposed on three sides of a square.
10. Incorrect. Elements of the Light Brigade did not encounter Lancers until the retreat up the North Valley.
11. I am not aware of any report that the 3rd Don Heavy battery re-opened fire after they were over-run.
12. According to Captain Soame Gambier Jenyns, only 19 officers and men of the 13th Light Dragoons were present (with horses) 30 minutes after the return from the Charge. He further stated "We had 110 horses and eight officers when we went into action (young Goad's horse, the one he jumped the timber on, was knocked over by a round shot early in the day, and the young 'un hurt in the fall [see13, below]) seventy-six troopers' and seven officers' horses killed on the spot, ten shot afterwards, and eight wounded still alive. I only brought nine mounted men back! " [referring to his own squadron] and "we had only 110 horses on parade that morning, and had eighty- six killed and ten wounded, and every officer's horse killed except Percy Smith's."

**13.** Captain Thomas Howard Goad was killed, while his brother, Cornet George Maxwell Goad, was injured when his horse was shot under him before the Charge took place. 762 Trumpet Sergeant Major John Linkon and 1106 Trumpet Sergeant Major George Smith were taken prisoner. Both were exchanged and rejoined the service troops on 26 October, 1855.

**14.** This refers to the hurricane which struck the area on 14 November, 1854.

**15.** 'Parker' may well have been 954 Corporal William Henry Parker of the 13th Light Dragoons. According to L. W. Crider's book *'In Search of the Light Brigade'* (p 284), Parker was born in Norton, Worcester (ca. 2.5 miles from St. Johns). He enlisted on 12 October, 1838 and bought his discharge at Cahir on 24 January, 1857. Parker was awarded the British Crimea Medal with all four clasps (A,B,I,S) but is not listed as a 'Charger'.